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The College of the City of New York.

Associate Alumni.

ADDRESS

OF THE

ASSOCIATE ALUMNI

TO THE

BOARD OF TRUSTEES.

New York:

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1869.

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Richard L. Larremore, Esq.,

President of the Board of Trustees.

Sir:

At the annual meeting of the Associate Alumni of the College of the City of New York, held at the college building, on the 2d of July, 1869, the following address to the Board of Trustees was unanimously adopted, and a copy ordered to be transmitted.

Very respectfully,

CHARLES ROBERTS, Jr.,

Secretary.

New York, September 1st, 1869.

To the Board of Trustees
Of the College of the City of New York.

GENTLEMEN:

During the past six months the college of which you were recently appointed trustees has been assailed in the press and elsewhere. An attempt has been made to prejudice against it the people of this city and the legislature of the state. These attacks need not cause alarm; they do not portend immediate danger. Public institutions are often the targets of unfriendly criticism; but legislatures and great cities have ever been slow to abolish colleges, or even to check their natural development. Our college was created to satisfy a public want, its establishment being asked for by the Board of Education and authorized by four fifths of the voters of this city. In the twenty years of its existence it has done good work; the Regents of the University and several legislative committees have borne testimony to its excellence, which, moreover, is admitted by all who have more than a speculative knowledge of education. For these reasons, and because we know how easy it is for ever so small a number of opponents to raise a clamor against any, even the best, institution, and how little indicative such clamor is of the feeling of the community, we have hitherto refrained from public argument. Lest, however, continued silence on the part of its alumni should be interpreted as a partial admission of the charges made against our college, we beg now, at our annual meeting, to address you, and, through you, the people of this city, in its defence.

The abolishment of the college has been demanded on the score of economy. How much does it cost to maintain it? Last year $120,000 was appropriated for the support of the college; the total tax levy was in excess of twenty-four millions of dollars. In other words, somewhat less than the two-hundredth part of the city budget was devoted to the higher education furnished by the city college.

There are persons who do not object to the expenditure in itself, but call it wasteful in relation to the results obtained. A writer in one of the journals of this city has stated, (and, after correction, has reiterated,) that this higher education costs several thousand dollars for each graduate, representing the whole work of the college as consisting in the production of graduates. Truly a strange view! Is education a thing of such nature, that only that amount which is given in a full college course is valuable, and all lesser amounts are worth nothing? Are the six hundred young men who, from year to year, receive a partial education at the college to be wholly ignored? Are the habits of mind, the knowledge and the culture which they acquire in various periods shorter than that of the full course wholly unprofitable to them and to the community? Not in their own estimation; as, from personal acquaintance with them, the members of this association can testify. No! the work done for and through these young men who attend the college for limited periods constitutes, perhaps, its chief usefulness. Through them it most effectually leavens the whole community with an intelligent regard for learning and an intelligent sympathy with the higher aims and labors of civilization.

The young men who have natural ability and perseverance sufficient to complete a college education are few in any community; and of these, many are prevented by want of money. In the college of this city the burden is made as light as possible: not only is tuition free, but the books are furnished to the student, and there is absolutely no charge under any name whatever. In addition, our association has established an Aid Fund, from which we have assisted a number of young men who could not otherwise have continued at college. This assistance is given not as charity, but in the shape of loans; much of the money loaned has been returned, and used over again. Every winter several students of the higher classes find remunerative employment in the evening schools under your charge. If, in spite of all these facilities, large numbers leave before reaching the highest class, it is, because, with each advance in their studies, their ability and perseverance are put to a severer test; because, in this great and chiefly commercial city, the allurements of business often prove more powerful than the charms of study; because, with increasing age, the American eagerness to be self-supporting grows stronger;

and because, with each year, it becomes, indeed, more and more difficult for parents in moderate circumstances to maintain their sons at college, though food, lodging and clothing be all that they are called upon to provide. And yet it would be a great mistake to suppose that most of those who do graduate at our college are the sons of wealthy parents; nothing could be further from the truth. No! a large majority of our body were not reared in affluence, and are not, actually or prospectively, inheritors of ancestral wealth; many of us could not have gone to college, if the education and books had not been free; many would not have gone but for being naturally promoted to this college from the public schools; and many could not have been made to go as charity scholars to institutions where others pay. The diminution of the number of scholars in the successive classes of the college is the exact counterpart of the progressive diminution in our schools, from the primary grade, where the pupils are numbered by thousands, to the highest classes in the grammar schools, where they are counted by dozens or scores. Yet the value of our schools is never measured by the number of scholars in their upper classes. This question, like many others, may be viewed from opposite points. While we deplore the diminution in the number of students, we must, at the same time, rejoice that so many more young men than eventually graduate are yet enabled to enjoy the benefits of a college for a season. To the ordinary colleges of the country very few young men repair who do not intend to graduate; to ours, hundreds come to stay as long as they can.

Again there are persons who, though they neither object to the appropriation of money to higher education, nor commit the singular mistake of ignoring in their calculations all students who do not become bachelors of arts, or of sciences, entertain the opinion that the $120,000 spent upon the college is so much taken from the primary schools, where it is more needed. A sufficient reply to this objection is, that the money required for the support of the college is raised separately, so that the general school fund would not be increased by even one dollar, if the college were not in existence. But were the fact otherwise, were the money for the college taken from the school fund, it would still be well applied. Well did the Board of Education say, in their report for the year 1853, when speaking of the college (then known as the Free Academy):

"If the Free Academy were limited in its benefits to those who enter within its walls and submit to its direct influence, it should long ago have disarmed the few who look with disfavor upon it, and, from time to time, suggest that it is too expensive. But this, its direct instruction, is the least part of the benefits it confers upon us. If it had no pupils to be taught within its narrow precincts—if it were but a mere dumb show—and yet conferred upon the city the indirect benefits which now flow from it, it would be worth three-fold its cost. In no manner so well as through this institution could the same money be devoted to the profit of the hundred and twenty thousand children now registered in our common schools, and soon to be swelled to a quarter of a million. How else could we get that fresh and cheerful ambition which now characterizes teachers and pupils; that high tone of public education to which we are daily approaching, and which we must soon reach; and, most of all, that universal affection for our school system so adapted to all, so economical and useful to all, as well those who pay taxes directly, as those who, destitute of property, still in numberless indirect exactions, bear at least their share of the burdens of citizenship; and that pride in it which pervades every class of people, and hedges it round with an impregnable defence?"

It is a well known fact that the college has induced, and does still induce, many wealthy citizens to send their sons to the public schools. We cannot suppose the less affluent and the poor people of the city so blindly fierce in their opposition to aristocracy as not to recognize the refinement and power naturally connected with the home-culture of the children of the wealthy, and to be unwilling to have their own children associate, and on a footing of equal rights, with those more favored of fortune.

It is to be feared that the abolishment of the college would react most unfortunately upon our public schools. It would tend to reduce them to what they were in the early part of the century, and what, essentially, they continued to be until the establishment of the Board of Education, and the almost simultaneous establishment of the Free Academy—it would tend to make our common schools charity schools. But laudable as the maintenance of charity schools is in default of something better, the free school system of this country is, certainly, neither understood nor meant to be a charity system.

The interdependence of schools of all grades, from the primary school to the university, is a fundamental principle of educational

science; it is as impossible to have good schools without good colleges, as it is to have good colleges without good schools. This principle is recognized not only in the educational systems of the most advanced countries of Europe; not only by our Western states, whose free state-universities are in organic relation with their public schools; but by many cities and towns in every part of our country, which have established, and are establishing, free high-schools, academies and colleges. Shall the City of New York, a pioneer in the field, recede? has she become so illiberal, and so unwise?

It has been stated that too much time is given, in our college, to Latin and Greek. Indeed, there have not been wanting writers and speakers who have declaimed against the tyrannical enforcement of the study of the dead tongues upon all the students of the college. Yet, from the organization of the college in 1849 to this day, a free choice has been given to each student between the ancient and the modern languages. In all other respects the course of study is the same for all students; and all the privileges and honors of the college are equally accessible to all. This provision has always been regarded as one of the best and distinguishing features of the college. If, nevertheless, a considerable number of the students choose Latin and Greek—whatever their reason may be, whether they deem a knowledge of these languages necessary for success in their future professions, whether they believe the study of the ancient a better training than that of the modern tongues, or they be influenced simply by traditional prejudice, by the desire to know something of a department of learning which, more than any other, has, for centuries, been a common possession of educated men—if, for any or all of these reasons, many students choose the Latin and Greek, we think it not only right to allow them their choice, but consider their choice a subject of congratulation. While it is not best that all young men should study Latin and Greek, it is very desirable that some should, if for no other, then for this reason, that our modern civilization, our literature, the character of our thought, the cast of our mind, result very largely from the civilization and literature of Athens and Rome. And we are not yet in a condition, if, indeed, we ever shall be, to sever from the earlier civilization. Says a profound and popular writer: "To discard altogether the learning and science of antiquity would

be suicidal; it would be like climbing up a ladder and calling to one's friends to saw off the lower part." Your Board may be glad that you are not called upon to decide, which young men shall study the ancient tongues, and which the modern; but you may be equally glad, that, notwithstanding popular declamation in favor of practical studies, some young men are still found to study the speech and the works of classical antiquity.

This leads us to say a few words upon the studies popularly called practical. We consider them of the highest importance; we are as proud as we are grateful, that in our college so much attention has always been paid to them. Its students have always received systematic instruction in mathematical, free-hand, and architectural drawing; in physics and chemistry, and their applications to life; in the higher mathematics; in surveying and engineering; in physiology and the laws of health; in the European languages necessary to the merchant and the man of practical science; and, in what is equally important, the use of our own language. Some of these branches are not embraced in the course of study of any college but our own; and, outside of the work done in special and voluntary classes, few, if any, of them are taught to the same extent. Yet, all these subjects are, of right and necessity, pursued unprofessionally; since that more special study which would make a department more useful to one student, would make it less so to another. Few young men know, while in college, what will be their life-business; few show a marked fitness, or have a decided preference.

A college is not chiefly valuable because it fits its alumni for the successful prosecution of their several vocations. The object of a college, especially a people's college, ought to be, in the first place, not to put money into the people's pockets, but knowledge into the people's brains. Knowledge is power, and there is no permanent power which is not based upon knowledge. Political power is based upon political knowledge. To the citizen, as such, knowledge of history, law, social science and general literature is more valuable than knowledge of physical science; logical and rhetorical ability are to him more useful than mechanical ability. If, therefore, the people, as a whole, desire that this country and every community in it shall remain truly democratic, if they would prevent the establishment of fixed classes, they must make

the acquisition of such knowledge and ability possible for all. In our institution, the classical and other literary departments must be retained; every proposition for devoting the college to scientific instruction alone, should be unconditionally rejected.

We come, finally, to the suggestion of those opponents of the college, who would make a compromise with the people, and have those pupils of the public schools who desire a collegiate education instructed at some private college in the city at the public expense. This project must be condemned for many reasons. By adopting the course suggested, hundreds of young men now brought under college influence would, obviously, never get beyond a common school; the public schools would suffer by the withdrawal of a beneficial influence, whose importance has been shown; the plan of these schools would have to be materially and most inconveniently altered to enable them to fit their scholars for the other colleges. Moreover, the city would have to relinquish the control of the studies of these scholars after their entrance into college; and the advantages of our peculiar, more practical, and more complete course of instruction would be lost. In addition, it must be borne in mind that the other colleges are sectarian institutions. With more or less strictness they make religious orthodoxy a qualification necessary for the office of academic instructor. The College of the City of New York alone is purely a state institution, and entirely unsectarian: it receives, upon terms of practical and legal equality, young men of all shades of religious belief, including those who belong to sects not numerous or wealthy enough to maintain colleges for themselves. These young men, mingling together, learn, incidentally, that intelligence and worth are not distributed among men in accordance with ecclesiastical distinctions. Will the City of New York consent to lose so beneficial, so liberalizing, so necessary an institution? Will you, gentlemen, allow the College of the City of New York to suffer harm?

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